

## **Towards a better understanding of academic professionalism: introducing a new conceptual model as an analytical tool (0207)**

**Evans** Linda<sup>1</sup>, <sup>1</sup>*University of Leeds, Leeds, United Kingdom*

### **Introduction**

With the changes that have impacted upon many countries' higher education sectors in the last twenty years (Enders and de Weert, 2000) it is easy to assume that academic professionalism must also have been affected. But is this the case? Certainly the contexts and environments within which academics work have changed, but it is important not to equate these with professionalism. Has academic professionalism indeed changed - is it *still* changing - and, if so, in what specific ways?

To address this question one must consider what academic professionalism now 'looks like', whether it is truly a 'new' professionalism that has emerged, and, if so, what is novel about it. But before any of this may be done it is necessary to clarify what is meant by 'academic professionalism'. Herein lies the purpose of my paper. It presents my original conceptualisation of professionalism, applied to academics. It then considers the extent to which this conceptualisation may be usefully applied to analysing the specific nature, or essence, of academic professionalism, and, following on from this, to comparing professionalisms and identifying the bases, nature and extent of their similarities and differences.

### **What is academic professionalism?**

Kolsaker (2009, pp. 515-6) rightly reminds us that '[p]rofessionalism is a challenging concept to research, since the field is relatively under-researched, and such research as exists is criticised as ambiguous and lacking a solid theoretical foundation.' It is, she adds, 'inherently difficult to pinpoint' its constitution and characteristics. Indeed, the lack of consensus over what professionalism means is widely acknowledged (Englund, 1996; Fox, 1992; Freidson, 1994; Hargreaves and Goodson, 1996). A range of views (Evetts, 2003; Gleeson et al., 2005; Hoyle, 1975; Nixon, 2001, 2003; Nooredgraf, 2007; Ozga, 1995; Sockett, 1996; Troman, 1996) represent professionalism variously as, *inter alia*: a form of occupational control; a socially constructed and dynamic entity; the application of knowledge to specific cases; the use of knowledge as social capital; a normative values system; the basis of the relationship between professionals and their publics; and a basis and determinant of social and professional status.

My own conceptualisation of professionalism lies close to Foucault's consideration of it as a 'certain mode of being' in a work context (Foucault 1991, p. 2, cited in Kolsaker, 2009, p. 517). I define it as *[professionalism-influenced] work practice that is consistent with commonly-held consensual delineations of a specific profession or occupation and that both contributes to and reflects perceptions of the profession's or occupation's purpose and status and the specific nature, range and levels of service provided by, and*

*expertise prevalent within, the profession or occupation, as well as the general ethical code underpinning this practice.* I perceive professionalism as qualitatively neutral: as something that *is* rather than something that *ought to be* - and something that applies to every occupational workforce, not just an elite category. This interpretation is consistent both with societal changes that have led to ‘the professionalisation of everyone’ (Scott, 2009; Williams, 2008), and, related to this, shifts in thinking and theoretical perspectives within the sociology of the professions (Evetts, 2003).

To me, then, professionalism is principally about people’s being (as) practitioners or workers and, as such, it relates to and conveys: what they do (in the context of their working lives); how they do it; what they know and understand; where and how they acquire their knowledge and understanding; what (kinds of) attitudes they hold; what codes of behaviour they follow; what their function is: what purposes they perform; what quality of service they provide; and the level of consistency incorporated into the above. Academic professionalism is simply this interpretation of professionalism applied to academics, who, following Williams (2008), I categorise as employees of higher education institutions (HEIs) whose core responsibilities are teaching and research.

My conceptualisation is represented in figure 1, which essentially deconstructs professionalism into what I currently (this being work-in-progress) identify as its key constituent parts, arranged in two tiers. (In the full paper to be presented at conference I explain the model and its components fully.)

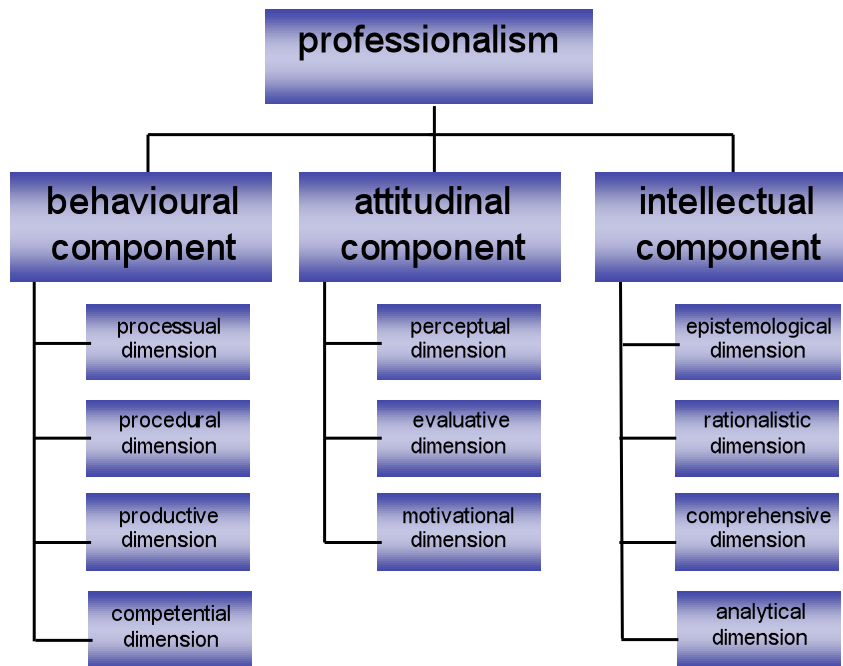


Figure 1: the componential structure of professionalism

## **Academic professionalism under the microscope: using the model as an analytical tool**

I question the bases and authenticity of some analyses that equate systemic or other contextual changes with changes to academic professionalism. There is a danger that they are impressionistic, presumptive, or prescriptive rather than descriptive. Elsewhere (Author, 2008) I have identified three ‘reified states’ of professionalism: *required* or *demanded* professionalism; *prescribed* professionalism; and *enacted* professionalism’. I now add a fourth: *deduced* or *assumed* professionalism, which is reflected in much of the literature. Yet, of these, only enacted professionalism reflects ‘reality’.

With reference to my model, if academic professionalism has indeed changed, in relation to which components has it done so? Have academics’ values changed, for example, (the evaluative dimension), or is it the processes that they apply to their work that have changed (the processual dimension), or has their output changed (the productive dimension) or their capacity for analysis (the analytical dimension)? My own twenty years’ experience as an academic leads me to afford some credence to Kolsaker’s (2009) findings from a survey of over 7000 academics in a range of UK institutions. Examining the impact on academics’ working lives of post-reform managerialism she found: ‘in contrast to much of the literature that predicts deprofessionalisation’ (p.520) ‘... [a]cademics appear, on the whole, to accept managerialism not only as an external technology of control, but as a facilitator of enhanced performance, professionalism and status’ (p. 522).

The kind of deduction or assumption that inaccurately identifies new professionalism or deprofessionalisation as an automatic outcome of reform or systemic change could be avoided if guesswork – albeit educated or informed guesswork – were replaced with a more reliable form of analysis. The contribution that my conceptual model makes is that, used as a framework, it has the potential to inject more precision into the analytical process by pinpointing the precise dimensions or components of professionalism that are purported to have changed, rather than considering professionalism as a holistic concept.

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